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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PRESIDENT SLEIMAN PLEASED WITH U.S. VISIT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) Two of President Michel Sleiman's Senior Advisors who accompanied him on his first official trip to the United States reported that the President was pleased with his visit, and with the clear message he received of continuing U.S. political and military support for Lebanon. The advisors mentioned the "differences" on the issue of Hizballah's arms. Sleiman reportedly was "satisfied" with President Bush's assurances that the U.S. would continue to support the creation of a Palestinian state, which eventually should be the home to Lebanon's Palestinian refugees, and welcomed the President's news that the U.S. would provide \$850,000 in new funding for demining efforts in Lebanon.

¶2. (C) Sleiman's being received as he was, in our view, helped restore the role of the Lebanese president, placing him on par with other world leaders. Putting Lebanon's national interests first was a dominant theme of the visit, one which allowed Sleiman to avoid upsetting either his Syrian neighbors or U.S. hosts by appearing to favor one side over the other. To convince Sleiman that the U.S. also has Lebanon's best interests at heart, now is the time to accelerate U.S. assistance. Although Sleiman did not return to Lebanon with attack helicopters in his pocket, as many had speculated, expectations are high that an announcement soon.
End summary and comment.

¶3. (C) Charge Grant, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with President Sleiman's Diplomatic Advisor Ambassador Naji Abi Assi and Political Advisor Nazem Khoury on September 27 and September 29, respectively. Both accompanied Sleiman on his recent trip to New York to attend the UN General Assembly and to Washington and participated in the meetings with President Bush and Secretaries Rice and Gates. Sleiman also held 18 bilateral meetings on the margins of UNGA, where, according to Abi Assi, he received much personal support.

STRONG U.S. SUPPORT FOR LEBANON;
SLEIMAN PRESSES NATIONAL AGENDA

¶4. (C) Both advisors painted a positive picture of the visit, relaying Sleiman's personal satisfaction as well. The U.S. demonstrated its clear political and military support for Lebanon, as well as for the new Lebanese President, they said. Abi Assi noted that all of Sleiman's interlocutors, including members of Congress, thanked him for his efforts to restart the National Dialogue. Khoury deemed it "a very positive visit on all levels."

¶5. (C) Abi Assi said Sleiman stressed three points in his meetings with U.S. officials: 1) Lebanon and the U.S. share the same values, including democracy and respect for human rights; 2) both countries face the same fight against terrorism; and 3) Lebanon will seek friendly relations with Syria if (and only if) it is in Lebanon's national interests.

Both advisors stressed that Sleiman had only Lebanon's interests at heart. For this reason, Khoury noted, Sleiman did not always say exactly what his interlocutors wanted to hear. Khoury said this was a "new approach" aimed at promoting a purely Lebanese national agenda, whether in talking to Washington, Damascus, or Tehran.

GOOD CHEMISTRY WITH POTUS

¶6. (C) Abi Assi said there was "good chemistry" between the two Presidents, adding that there was no tension in the meeting with President Bush, unlike Sleiman's August meetings with Syrian President Asad. President Bush reportedly stressed the need for the Syrian regime to change its policies, but said he was not against Asad, whom he said he did not know personally. Abi Assi's impression was that President Bush was not "100 percent negative" on the Syrian leader because he refrained from using the "usual language" about Syria's role in facilitating terrorism.

¶7. (C) Abi Assi also confirmed that Sleiman raised the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. President Bush reportedly shared U.S. concerns about the plight of the refugees and agreed with the need to find a solution. According to Abi Assi, President Bush said the U.S. therefore supported the creation of a Palestinian state to which the refugees could return. Khoury said Sleiman was "satisfied" with President Bush's "clear statement" on the Palestinian issue, on which there was a "frank and straightforward" discussion.

¶8. (C) Both Abi Assi and Khoury said President Bush also informed Sleiman about \$850,000 in new funding for demining projects in Lebanon, in addition to continuing support for Lebanon's security forces.

HIZBALLAH'S ARMS, SUPPORT FOR LAF DOMINATE DISCUSSION WITH SECRETARY GATES

¶9. (C) According to Abi Assi, Secretary Gates told Sleiman he was "the right man, at the right place, at the right moment."

The only issue of contention was Hizballah, which Sleiman said Lebanon did not consider a militia. This was nothing new, Abi Assi stressed; Sleiman himself had said this before, as had Prime Minister Siniora. Khoury said once again Sleiman was telling it like it was: the Lebanese could not consider Hizballah a militia since it was part of the government, parliament, and society.

¶10. (C) According to Abi Assi, Sleiman told Secretary Gates that Hizballah's weapons were an issue for dialogue and therefore an issue that could be addressed, but stressed that the arms should not be used. According to Khoury, Sleiman's argument was that while the "resistance" could not become the state, the state should become the "resistance." Secretary Gates reportedly wished Sleiman good luck in this effort, albeit "in a nice way."

¶11. (S/NF) In response to Sleiman's request for more U.S. assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Abi Assi said Secretary Gates replied that the answer would be forthcoming

at the October 5-6 Joint Military Commission in Beirut. Khoury said Gates had said the LAF would receive helicopters in a few weeks, a misconception the Charge quickly corrected, adding that the issue probably would be discussed at the JMC. Secretary Gates reportedly made it a point to praise Defense Minister Elias Murr and newly appointed LAF Commander Jean Kahwagi quite strongly in front of Foreign Minister Salloukh, Abi Assi added.

WITH IRAN, SYRIA, SLEIMAN LOOKS OUT
FOR LEBANON'S NATIONAL INTERESTS

¶12. (C) In his bilateral meeting with Iranian president Ahmajinedad, Sleiman stressed the need for reconciliation among Lebanon's various sects, and Hizballah's need to be mindful of the importance of Christian support. The indirect message to Ahmajinedad, Abi Assi explained, was that Iran should support reconciliation efforts in Lebanon (i.e., via Hizballah).

¶13. (C) According to Abi Assi, Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem promised that there would be diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon before the end of the year. Abi Assi speculated that Deputy FM Faisal Muqdad, a former Syrian PermRep to the UN, might be Syria's choice for Ambassador to Lebanon.

SLEIMAN'S NEXT STOPS:
SAUDI ARABIA, MONTREAL,
ROME, IRAN, EGYPT, GERMANY

¶14. (C) According to his advisors, Sleiman next will travel to Saudi Arabia October 12-13, a trip Abi Assi predicted would be "more difficult" than the U.S. trip because of ongoing tensions between Riyadh and Damascus. The President will then attend the October 16-17 meeting of the "Francophonie" in Montreal, where he also will meet with French President Sarkozy, Egyptian President Mubarak, and Algerian President Bouteflika. On October 30-31, Sleiman will travel to Rome, where he is scheduled to meet with the Pope. (Note: Abi Assi said former LAF G-2 Intelligence Director and Ambassador-Designate to the Holy See George Khoury was waiting for agreement, which, due to a Papal conclave October 5-26, he probably would not receive in time for Sleiman's visit. End note.)

¶15. (C) Both Abi Assi and Khoury were vague on dates for Sleiman's planned trip to Iran, stating only that it would occur in November, followed by a visit to Egypt in December. Khoury added Germany to the list of upcoming presidential trips.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) It seems that Sleiman clearly was pleased with his first official visit to the United States. In addition to securing continuing U.S. political and military support for Lebanon, its institutions, including the Presidency, and himself personally, he made his case regarding Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and reportedly was satisfied with the response.

¶17. (C) His visit also reinvigorated the role of the Lebanese President, not to mention his own personal stature, on the world stage. Sleiman had been apprehensive about traveling to Washington, presumably for fear of upsetting pro-Syrian political actors in Lebanon. However, by raising issues such as Hizballah's arms and the Palestinian refugees, and putting them in the context of "national interest," it seems to us that he managed to maintain the balance between the two political blocs he has sought since becoming President. In other words, his trip to the U.S. did not weaken his position among the pro-Syrian opposition.

¶18. (C) We must continue to follow through with tangible

military, economic, and political assistance to convince Sleiman that the U.S. -- unlike Syria and Iran -- has Lebanon's best interests at heart. There was speculation in the media and even among some of our pro-majority contacts that Sleiman would return from Washington with an announcement on attack helicopters. Since he did not, there likely will be increased expectation for an announcement of some sort of enhanced military assistance at the October 5-6 Joint Military Commission meeting. End comment.

GRANT